Protecting Children from Trafficking in Benin:
In Need of Politics and Participation

Abstract

This paper critically examines policy in Benin against child trafficking. Drawing on interviews and participant observation with adolescent labour migrants and their communities, it problematizes both the assumptions underpinning anti-trafficking policy and the appropriateness of the initiatives that comprise it. It suggests that, in order truly to protect the young labour migrants defined as trafficked, the policy-making establishment needs to focus more closely on the structural economic underpinnings of migration and exploitation, and to adopt a more participatory approach to policy-making.

Introduction

People say that moving is bad, but what alternatives do they offer?
They have never even been here to find out how we live.

(Interview with T, 30/8/7)[1]

This paper challenges conventional thinking around an issue that has been identified by the international child protection community as one of the major challenges of the past decade, namely 'child trafficking'[2]. My involvement in this field dates to 2005, when I began working with a child rights NGO in Cotonou, Benin, and was immediately exposed to institutional and governmental concern over the apparent 'pandemic' engulfing the country. Struck by the disjunction between the lived realities of the young labour migrants with whom I worked and the official representation of them as 'victims of trafficking', my research has sought to examine the creation, operation and consequences of this disjunction, with a particular focus on the failures of policy to achieve the protection it claims as its goal. I concentrate here specifically on the way community understandings of adolescent work and migration and the unaddressed structural backdrop to 'poverty' point to major gaps in the discursive and policy framework that can only be addressed through greater community participation in the identification of protection problems and solutions, and a more direct engagement on the part of the policy establishment with the politics of poverty.

Research context and methodological overview

Child trafficking began to emerge as a 'problem issue' in Benin at the start of the last decade. Though child labour had long been a focus of international and national attention within the country, child trafficking arrived to displace it as the central preoccupation with the development of the 'Trafficking Protocol' and with the advent of the 'Etireno Affair'[3], as a result of which Benin became tarred as an 'epicentre' of the international traffic in children.

Shamed by this designation, Benin's government quickly ratified the Trafficking Protocol[4], facilitating an influx of anti-trafficking funds and establishing various anti-trafficking initiatives. As elsewhere in the world, the 'trafficking' of children was

defined as any component of the process that coupled movement with exploitation, and 'exploitation' was taken to include any economically productive activity 'unacceptable' for a child and from which a third party derives a profit. As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s anti-child-labour framework, 'unacceptable' activities included work in 'mining and quarrying; manufacturing; construction; electricity, gas and water; sanitary services; transport, storage and communication; and plantations and other agricultural undertakings mainly producing for commercial purposes, but excluding family and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers' (ILO 1973, article 5(3)).

My investigations into Benin's anti-trafficking policy have taken me through five countries over 14 months, during which I conducted over 180 interviews with more than 300 people, and observed and worked with individuals and institutions at every level of the policy chain. At the institutional level, I focussed on those bodies at the heart of producing and sustaining the anti-trafficking discourse, and at the forefront of forming and implementing anti-trafficking policy, both in Cotonou and throughout Benin.

At the 'ground' or 'community' level – from which most of the data underpinning this paper is drawn – I divided my work into two phases. First, I interned in a shelter for 'rescued children' run by an international non-governmental organisation, and I spent months working with and interviewing young people identified as victims of trafficking. Second, I chose four case study villages from two districts in the Zou Region, where I interviewed community leaders, community members and current and former young migrants supposed by the authorities to be victims of trafficking. I chose these villages for two reasons. First, they are from a region that has been institutionally identified as a 'hub' of child labour, trafficking and exploitation. This is itself a result of the fact that young males frequently migrate to Nigeria for mine work – an activity that has been identified as an archetype of child labour and trafficking. Second, these villages are also at the heart of the Beninese 'cotton belt', which has seen household incomes plummet and remain low over the last 15 years as a result of international falls in the price of cotton. I therefore wished to explore the hitherto un-examined link between declining income from cotton and adolescent movement to the mines.

In total, I interviewed 170 people across these four villages. I used various participatory techniques in the villages, including principally open-ended individual and group interviews, covering how people see their life-worlds, how they experience and view youth work and movement, how they understand childhood and the transition to adulthood, the links between cotton and movement, and what people have to say about current anti-trafficking interventions. I have consistently discussed my interpretations of interview data with informed colleagues and interviewees.

Dominant narratives and policy prescriptions

Since it is both widely known and has been well documented elsewhere (see, for example, Alber 2011, Hashim and Thorsen 2011, Howard 2011), I will only briefly outline here the dominant narrative around child trafficking and the mainstream policy approach to dealing with it. In Benin, as in many other countries, trafficking is depicted as the major child protection challenge facing the authorities, attaining near

pandemic levels. The crime is seen to be comprised of two interlinked components which are themselves individually problematic – child work and child migration – and is understood to be the result of a number of pathological cause-factors. These factors begin with 'poverty', which is always treated as a causeless, abstract reality. They also include criminal deviance, poor parenting, and the corruption of traditional mechanisms of social solidarity that involve the circulation of children between families. The general trend in the narrative is that child work and migration are inherently dangerous, that children should be at 'home' with their families and at school for their well-being, and that when they are not, it must be as a consequence of some crisis situation, such as kidnap, a flight from starvation, or parents being tricked into 'selling' their offspring.

Though steps taken by the state and its partners to address trafficking include the small-scale roll-out of micro-credit or the promotion of free schooling, the major emphasis of all efforts has been on preventing child work and the migration that is seen to lead to it. This has involved the passing of a national anti-trafficking law that regulates child movement and makes it legally very difficult, the establishment of 'village vigilance committees' to prevent children migrating for work, the expansion of border surveillance in co-operation with Nigeria, and the massive promotion of 'sensitisation' campaigns aimed at convincing parents that home is where a child should be, as opposed to away and in work. Of crucial importance is that little distinction is practiced between small children and older adolescents who, while legally still minors, are socially closer to adulthood.

The rest of this paper challenges the utility of such approaches by contrasting the dominant narrative with community-level understanding and by offering a political-economic analysis of the poverty that forms their context.

The view from below

The image that emerges from my research with young migrants and their communities is significantly more complex than that propagated by the institutions promulgating the anti-trafficking discourse. Though, at times, work and migration *can* be experienced negatively by the young, in most cases they are seen as positive realities and constructive life strategies.

Child work

In my case study villages, work, whether inside the home or for remuneration outside it, is not seen as a damaging 'adult' sphere from which under-18s are to be sheltered, nor in fact as anything other than an eminently positive and necessary part of being young and growing up. In most households, children as young as three may be asked to perform basic tasks such as filling pots of water, progressing at five or six to keeping an eye on their very smallest siblings, at eight or nine to washing those younger than themselves or sweeping the courtyard, and at 12 to cooking, cleaning and taking on the rest of the tasks performed by adult household members at home or within the context of their small-scale economic activities. One village elder in Tenga explained to me the incorporation of young males into the agricultural labour force: 'Already at eight you can go to the field. At 12 you can begin to work like a man.' (Group 8 Interview, Tenga Village, Zogbodomey, 9/5/10.)

Such realities are not viewed as a grave hardship. For young children, the line between 'work' and 'play' is much thinner than is perceived by the anti-trafficking policy establishment, and inventive children regularly incorporate pot-filling and sibling care into various entertaining games. Children also regularly profess to enjoy the activities they are tasked with, even if at times these activities may be taxing. In one of the many interviews I conducted with groups of adolescents during which we discussed precisely this issue, I asked how they felt about working and whether they liked it, and received in response a cacophony of 'yesses', with the addendum 'because it feeds us!' (Group 12 Interview, Atomè Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10).

This addendum points to the core of both the positive view of child work and the gradual incorporation of even young children into the working collective. The understanding of work dominant here is integrally related to the need to secure subsistence in what is a materially poor environment. 'We're not in France, after all,' one teenage interviewee declared (Interview with CS, Sehere Village, Zakpota, 12/4/10), and the young, along with all other able-bodied household members, are thus both needed and expected to contribute to the collective endeavour that is necessary for life. Within this logic, their work, remunerated or otherwise, represents both an immediate necessity and a fruitful way of socialising them into the self-sufficient, responsible adults they will have to become as integral, contributing members to collective well-being.

This is underlined by much widely deployed local-level symbolism. On the one hand, it is *the thief* who represents the figure of universal revilement in the communities, since the thief embodies the unacceptable principle of taking without giving. On the other hand, I was repeatedly told that young children and adolescents were put to work precisely so that they could have the opportunity to *avoid* taking without giving – of 'doing nothing' – and 'so that they can learn how to take care of themselves'. Crucially, in this context, 'to take care of oneself' is translated in French as 'se prendre en charge', which has at once the simple meaning of 'looking after oneself' and, more subtly, of carrying one's own burden, since 'une charge' can be used to refer to a weight, responsibility, or other load that one must carry.

I came across a number of cases in which adults and teenagers explained that someone had been sent elsewhere to work specifically to learn how to 'se prendre en charge' and to avoid 'doing nothing'. My discussion with T showed this particularly clearly. He had been institutionally recognised as a 'former trafficker' because he had accompanied a number of adolescents across the border from Zakpota to the mines in Abeokuta, Nigeria. In each case, he claimed, parents had approached him on his visits back to Zakpota asking him to bring their child with him to Abeokuta, so as to avoid them wasting their time unproductively at home and so as to help them learn how to 'look after themselves' (Interview with T, Southern Benin, 30/8/7). As the saying in the North of the country has it, '*la poussière des pieds est mieux que celle des fesses*' – 'it is better to have dust on your feet than on your bottom' (Imorou 2009:7).

That the dust on one's feet may have come from a journey towards mine work is not seen here as inherently problematic. Where the anti-trafficking establishment sees mine work as the kind of work that is *necessarily* unacceptable and exploitative, for the communities with whom I researched, the *nature* of that work and its relation to

an individual's capacity is what matters. Thus, in numerous interviews, villagers and former teenage migrants to the mines complained about the nature of the official approach, as did my research assistant, who had been an NGO employee sub-contracted by the state to 'sensitise' locals against such work and movement. 'The state, white people, NGOs, they all come here and say don't let your kids leave for the mines because what they experience there is *slavery*,' I was told by one village elder (Interview with Artur, Sehere Village, Zakpota, 12/4/10). 'NGOs call everything slavery…to stop kids leaving,' Charley, a village head, continued (Interview, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 19/4/10).

My research showed that labour migration to the Nigerian mines, and the 'trafficking' that has been associated with it, is consistently being translated by the authorities at ground-level as 'kanoumon' – the Fon word for 'slavery'. Such is the local frustration with how far removed this designation remains from people's lived experiences of mine work, that when I asked one group of men how they themselves defined the work that teenage boys do in the mines, I received a genuinely emotional round of applause as 'the first person from outside to have ever come here and posed us this question' (Man in Group 2 Interview, Southern Benin, 12/4/10). This reaction was not unique. A core component of all the interviews I conducted with former young migrant mine workers and their communities was focussed on how they defined their work, how they understood exploitation, slavery, and trafficking and how they viewed the way others view them. Without fail, amid many expressions of frustration, I learned that nobody defined work in the mines as 'kanoumon'; rather, it is predominantly seen as an acceptable, if challenging, activity that *can*, at times, constitute 'afoutame', or 'exploitation', especially if workers are asked to perform beyond their reasonable *capacity*. My interview with Petrov was indicative in this regard:

> Neil: *What was the work like there [in Abeokuta]?*
> Petrov: Very hard, very physically demanding. Plus it meant being under the sun all day. And, when you're sick, the boss moans because it means he's losing money, so if you don't get well again you just get sent home, because you are expensive.
> Neil: *Do you define this as exploitation?*
> Petrov: Yes and no, it depends. It can be, if you're asked to do too much, and seeing as wages are so relatively low, but then we do agree to them, and we are looked after. Sometimes we refuse to work too hard as well.
> Neil: *Did you make friends there?*
> Petrov: Yes, loads. I could be working here and then I'll have my pal working over there by that tree, and another by that bush. There are loads of kids from around here and they are always bantering whilst working, just as they all eat together at meal times. Daily life there is ok.
> Neil: *Are you happier here?*
> Petrov: Yes, but there was also good, there was a good atmosphere. Plus, if you do five or six years and get on with your boss, he will show you the ropes and you can then become a boss yourself.
>
> (Interview with Petrov, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 10/5/10)

Migration

Work in, and migration to, the mines of Nigeria is thus viewed in a broadly positive light by these communities. What my interviews revealed, however, is that this understanding of migration transcends the mines; indeed, the decision to migrate is *generally* viewed as a constructive one, in large part because it is the principle vehicle through which people can access paid work and the opportunity that this underpins for self, family, and wider village. This was expressed to me especially when discussing how people perceive the anti-trafficking, anti-migratory messages they hear from the authorities. Below is an example I have extracted from my notes:

> *Atomè Village. 14/5/10. We have gathered round in the square at the heart of the village. Myself, W., about 15 teenage boys, and four or five teenage girls.*
>
> *Do you often hear the message at school that leaving is bad?* Unanimously, like a chorus, they all said yes. *Why? What do people say?* It is their teachers. Some said occasionally also their parents. They say that you can't be better off than where you are from and that you shouldn't leave. *What do you think when they say this?*
>
> - "We think it's rubbish, because we see people coming back with motorbikes and other things and so we know it's untrue". Lots of nods and agreement.
>
> - Another boy added that dropping out of school to migrate isn't great. But if you're not at school or doing something else then there is absolutely nothing wrong with it.
>
> - "It's true that you shouldn't leave if you are a pupil", a further boy echoed, "but if you are doing nothing and your dad says no you can't go away, then that is even bad on his part. Even in the summertime you can go and make some money you know."
>
> - The girls, through their elected spokesperson, said that as far as they are concerned, "if no-one helps parents to send their children to school, then it is absolutely fine for kids to leave and find work. They have to!"
>
> *What do you think of the idea of leaving for work then?*
>
> - The girls unanimously said that they also thought leaving was good, because there was no money in the village and because the people who leave come back with money, are able to build things for themselves, and then can quickly get married.
>
> (Group 12 Interview, Atomè Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10)

These views depend on the concentration of economic opportunity in locations outside of one's home village. Indeed, and not without good reason, perceptions of migrant destination centres, (Cotonou, Nigeria or 'yovotome' – 'the home of the white man') underline the notion that 'elsewhere' represents a land of opportunity, a

place where life is materially richer than 'here', and where one can and must go if one seeks to advance. The following extract offers a further flavour of this understanding:

> *Atomè Village. As above.*
>
> *What do you think of when we say 'Cotonou'?*
>
> *Boys*:
> - it's a big town that people go to.
> - it makes me think of business.
> - it's an economic centre and is where people go to find things.
> - it is choc-a-bloc full of NGOs and their projects, which we would like to see come here.
> *Girls*:
> - traffic lights, big roads, things that are there but not here.
> - electricity.
>
> *What about 'yovotome'?*
>
> *Boys*:
> - there are only whites over there, that is where they are from.
> - many machines.
> - big, beautiful buildings.
> - cold weather with strong winds.
> *Girls*:
> - aeroplanes.
>
> *How do you know that money is elsewhere and that leaving will help you get it?*
>
> *Girls*:
> - we have relatives who are well-off in Cotonou and when they come back here to visit we can see that they are living much better than we are.
>
> *Boys*:
> - we see it on the TV, on the serials, the teachers tell us that there is great wealth in Europe, and when a peasant goes away to sell his goods he quickly returns with lots of money.
>
> (Group 12 Interview, Atomè Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10)

These perceptions are evidently quite acute. Despite the establishment claim that 'home' is where the young should be, it is clear that economic wealth is concentrated in large urban centres rather than the countryside, in Nigeria rather than Benin, and in the West rather than sub-Saharan Africa. Such notions of 'elsewhere' as a land of opportunity are not confined only to my interviewees, or indeed only to the rural poor. In fact, large-scale work by the UNDP in Benin on rural and urban perceptions of poverty and socio-economic well-being echo what I found in my interviews. In one study conducted with a series of rural and urban communities in the South of the country, both populations saw themselves as relatively poor, both saw one's own

location as synonymous with negative economic prospects, and both saw various alternative destinations as embodying opportunity (PNUD and MPD 1995; 1996).

Given such understanding, various of my interviewees repeatedly articulated that they believed the migration of both young and old served as a tool for local development. In one particularly telling example, two female elders railed passionately against the anti-trafficking policy establishment:

> Neil: *What do you think of the message that young people shouldn't leave the village?*
> Woman 1: Those who tell us this are those who hold back the development of this village!! It is a terrible message! And they give us nothing in return. The NGOs come here but they bring nothing with them!
> Neil: *Why do NGOs and the government do this and say these things?*
> Woman 2: They don't want people to leave the village because they don't want to see us go and develop elsewhere instead of here. Fair enough, but their words are useless, because they bring nothing.
>
> (Group 6 Interview, Atomè Village, Zogbodomey, 28/4/10)

Though expressed with less vitriol, the words of another adult respondent offer a similar analysis:

> There is just no money in Benin in general. Nigeria has lots of opportunities and so people prefer to go there, work or buy things and then come back. This helps the village. For example, if one child leaves and comes back with a generator, that means the whole village can have access to light at festival times.
>
> (Man in Group 11 Interview, Tenga Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10)

The centrality of cash

The above examples demonstrate the importance of cash and access to it in the decisions of young people, or those who decide on their behalf, to migrate for work. That cash should be so important was further underlined when I examined with the communities what was meant by the Fon word '*ya*' – 'poverty'. Though 'poverty' frequently featured as an answer to the question 'why do young people leave here?', further discussion revealed that, in contrast to the anti-trafficking notion of poverty as destitution, 'poverty' here simply means a lack of the cash necessary to 'evolve'. When I asked if 'poverty' meant 'starvation' and whether 'poor' people remaining in the village 'would go without food', most people responded with an amused and resounding 'no'. Pointedly, one man explained that 'people don't die of hunger here', while another declared that 'even when there are no fish, people don't starve…people wouldn't let you starve, it's just that there's no money'.

Such linguistic digging was not necessary with all my interviewees. As the above examples testified, the importance of accessing money or material opportunity is

implicit in most migrant narratives. In many others, it is voiced explicitly as an inevitable part of life in a market economy

> There is nothing in the village, there is no work. Parents are obliged to let their kids go and when kids decide themselves to leave, parents are obliged to accept. When they go, kids at least make some money; they at least send some back to us. We understand the 'don't leave' message, but we can't eat their words can we?
>
> (Man during Group 3 Interview, Tenga Village, Zogbodomey, 16/4/10)

> I was in Nigeria working in the mines until only 5 months ago. If I'm not in Nigeria, I'm in Savè, because at least that gives me some money. I remember that one NGO came and said don't leave, promising to bring money for those who stayed, but they never did. Those who stayed had been tricked and were really sad, especially in comparison to those who did leave, and who made some money.
>
> (Teenager during Group 3 Interview, Tenga Village, Zogbodomey, 16/4/10)

The need for alternatives

Village-level understanding of what policy-makers *should* be doing to protect the young from exploitation (or 'trafficking'), therefore, differ markedly from those that pertain within the policy-making system. When I asked young migrants and their communities the question, 'what would you like to see the authorities do?', two responses consistently made themselves heard:

1) Provide us with economic alternatives to labour migration, and
2) Ensure that those who do migrate can work in safe conditions.

Key for these communities is the ability to access the money that underpins their individual and collective life projects. If possible, they would like to have the option to do this 'at home', but where they cannot, they at least wish to be able to work in safety. In the absence of policies that respond to these needs, communities both ignore and subvert the authorities and their attempt to control their work and migration. The following extracts from my interviews offer an indication of this fact:

> *Do you pretend to the NGOs and government, saying one thing to them and doing another?*
>
> There was lots of laughter amongst those that understood my question. Everybody said yes, they do.
>
> (Interview with Group 5, Zelele Village, 26/4/10)
>
> *So you just pretend to the authorities then?*
>
> Yes, of course. We say 'sure, we won't leave' in the hope that they'll bring us something.
>
> (Interview with Artur, Sehere Village, Zakpota, 12/4/10)

How do you go about getting around the authorities?

> They said the state has set up village committees all over the place, but these are corrupt. We can easily turn them and take kids away no problem. There are also many paths that you can take towards and across the border and the state has no idea about them all. The police sit there and guard the ones they know about and so we just take the others.
>
> (Interview with Group 2, 12/4/10)

Unless the authorities are prepared to alter their draconian and abolitionist approach to work, migration, and trafficking, little is likely to change in this regard.

Cotton and the political-economic threads of poverty

In light of the importance of money within the decision for the young to engage in labour migration, an obvious question is 'what is the cause of this lack of money?' Though there is not space to argue the case definitively here, my research with young migrants and their communities and related political-economic analysis suggests that it comes from the declining household income from cotton, the exposure Southern Beninese households have to commodity price volatility, and the US cotton subsidies that are a causal factor of the recent international depression in cotton prices.

At the national level, cotton accounts for around five per cent of Benin's GDP and almost 40 per cent of the country's export receipts (OECD 2005:20). It is the country's major cash-crop, and in villages including those in which I researched, there is no comparable way for many farming families to access money without migrating, since the climate is perfectly adapted to cotton, substitutes do not benefit from similarly well-organised agricultural markets, and there is minimal industrial development.

When discussing its relation to household livelihoods, farmers and state agricultural agents argued that when cotton works well, life is good, the country has money to spend, families have money to build, children go to school, and investments are made. One elderly woman explained, 'Before prices stayed low, all the young people earned some cash. They worked the fields and the old owned the land and paid them' (Group 6 Interview, Atomé Village, Zogbodomey, 28/4/10.) A local agricultural official echoed this assessment, saying, 'I can tell you, [before prices depressed], farmers used to look after us, they were so well off. They had money, people built houses, wells, had weddings and ceremonies, kids had money and went to school, people bought tractors.' (Interview with Donald, Regional State Agricultural Official, 26/4/10.)

In contrast to this, since the onset of price depression in the mid-1990s, small-scale household projects have been put on hold, more and more family members have had to enter the wage market, and ultimately many more have migrated, to Nigeria or to the cities. When asked, 'Is it true then that young people move more now that cotton returns are low?', one of the most indicative responses I received was, 'They wouldn't move at all if they were still high. They'd all be in school.' (Interview with Cliff, Sehere Village, Zakpota, 7/4/10.)

Research suggests that these lower prices are a result of more than 'natural' international price fluctuations. Arguably, they derive in part from US cotton subsidies (Alston et al. 2006). In a World Trade Organisation (WTO) case brought by Brazil, the WTO recognised that subsidies depress world (and thus household) prices (Sumner 2007:7), since they de-couple US cotton production from world cotton prices, such that US cotton-growers fail to respond in 'economically rational' terms to lower prices by reducing production, and instead maintain or even increase output levels, which further depresses the market (Fok n.d; Oxfam 2002; Fadiga et al. 2004; Cross 2006; Sumner 2007; Eagleton-Pierce 2010).

When I tried to address this issue with anti-trafficking policy-makers in Benin, the responses I received ranged from blank incredulity to the admission that engaging on such ground was politically impossible. For the most part, institutional interviewees failed to make the link between the political economy of subsidies and reduced household income. Only one did so without my prompting. With the others, 'poverty' was presented a causeless reality. When I suggested that anti-trafficking policy should tackle the link between subsidies and poverty, my respondents were clear that this would not happen. JayJay, for example, explained to me, 'We can't go beyond the limits of a country with our work. This is a national structure, it's a national delegation. We structurally cannot go beyond borders.' (Interview with Jayjay, Senior Donor Government Representative, Based in Benin, 2/4/10). Rose, a senior international organisation employee working at country level in Benin, curtly explained that her institution simply couldn't look at structural issues because it was 'politically unacceptable' (Interview 29/9/9), while Matt, a crucial figure in one donor country's head office, said that he intended to try and raise the issue, but was doubtful of success because there were 'big interests to fight' (Interview, 16/9/9). Perhaps most tellingly, a senior government representative based in Benin, had this to say (17/2/10):

> The foreigners here in Benin know that their policies cause poverty and trafficking. Many of them even want to change it, but they can't. Politicians aren't going to change these policies just because a few kids are trafficked. In their reports they just say 'poverty is the cause'. They say the poor national use and distribution of resources is a problem. It is organisational hypocrisy, we know it's bad, everyone knows, but what can we do? It's very difficult to change the macro-structure.

Conclusion

Working on the macro structure is, however, necessary if anti-trafficking policy in Benin is likely to be anything other than an obstacle that poor communities must navigate as they pursue their life goals. Over the course of this paper, I have demonstrated that the understanding of child work, migration, and exploitation that predominates within the community associated with anti-trafficking policy neither reflects the empirics of young migrant lives nor responds to the way young migrants see their lives. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a major consequence is that the communities targeted by anti-trafficking strategies actively resist and undermine those strategies.

If policy-makers wish to see a change in this situation, greater participation and greater politics are needed. At the macro-level, it is essential that they address the

very real, very tangible political-economy underpinnings of the lack of money of that constitutes the main backdrop to the migration and work of the young in this part of the world. At the micro-level, they need to engage with communities in developing economically viable alternatives to labour migration and pathways to ensure that those who do migrate for labour are able to do so in safety. Measures could include, for example, the expansion of labour inspectorates and the involvement of employers in establishing labour standards. They could also involve institutions speaking with one voice about the negative effects of US cotton subsidies, while fostering direct investment in supplementary industries in zones from which migrants come.

If they do not do this, little is likely to change at the level of the lived realities of young labour migrants and their communities. Indeed, it might be suggested that policy's major accomplishments will be legally and institutionally to entrench dominant norms relating to acceptable childhoods and to naturalise political-economic injustices. Regarding the latter, James Ferguson in *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1997) warned that policy efforts that abstract lived realities from their political-economic contexts lead ultimately to the normalizing and perpetuation of those contexts. In the case of youth labour migration from the Beninese cotton belt, by focussing on the 'symptom', namely movement, instead of the cause, the 'subsidies', anti-trafficking policy detracts critical attention from the conditions leading to what it seeks to prevent. Regarding the latter, we should recall Boyden's (1997) warning: policies that seek to intervene in the *way* families live, rather than on the conditions which structure *why* they live this way, contribute to the propagation of notions of 'normality' and 'deviance'. This in turn leads to the criminalization of those who do not adhere to the accepted norm – as has been the case with the migrant-sending families I worked with in Benin.

Endnotes

[1] All names of individuals, institutions and villages have been either changed or omitted to protect the identity of informants. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French are my own.

[2] Though I consider 'children' and 'childhood' to be situational concepts varying according to time, place, culture and social structure, amongst other things, the institutional literature and policy I am examining take 'children' to be those under the biological age of 18 and 'childhood' thus to be the period before one reaches that age. Since my research reflects on the appropriateness of these institutional understandings and policies, I have decided to engage with them on their own terms, and have therefore used the same criteria throughout this study. In my study, however, I focussed almost entirely on adolescent migrants, and the word 'child' will be used interchangeably with 'youth' unless otherwise specified.

[3] The Etireno was a Nigerian trawler used by a gang of people-smugglers to transport illegally Beninese and other West African children to work in Gabon. After a complex series of events, the ship and its passengers were found stranded at sea in difficult conditions for a number of days. This prompted the world's media to descend on the Gulf of Guinea and led to a flurry of high-profile reports on 'the slave ship' that heralded the uncovering of Benin's 'modern-day slave trade' (see, for example, *The Independent,* 18 April 2001).

[4] This treaty is officially titled the 'UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the Convention on Transnational Organised Crime' (UN 2000). It defines 'trafficking in persons' as 'the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation'.

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